

# Early Spring Migration

13<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> April 2015



**Summary:** A mixed bag of weather during the week with some lovely calm conditions at the end allowing thousands of Barnacle Geese to take advantage of the window and head north. Thousands of Golden Plovers, resplendent in their summer plumage were seen throughout the tour whilst wintering waders such as Purple Sandpiper could still be found along the coast. This mix of summer and winter visitors was a feature with lots of Arctic gulls such as Iceland and Glaucous Gulls still present at the same time as early migrants such as Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Whimbrel and Common Tern were trickling into the islands. More unusual species included a female Lesser Scaup and drake Green-winged Teal whilst raptors and in particular Hen Harrier which were a daily sight, helped make this inaugural, early spring trip a successful and varied tour.

Leader: Steve Duffield

Participants: Roger Tozer, Stephen and Carrie Cumming, Marie Watt and Jill.

### Daily Dairy:

#### 13<sup>th</sup> April:

Weather: A strong to gale force southerly wind blew throughout the day with persistent rain from early afternoon.

Carrie, Stephen and Roger had arrived prior to the first day of the tour so we met up and had a couple of hours birding around west Benbecula before meeting Marie and Jill off the 11 am



flight from Glasgow. Our first stop was at Coot Loch where we had a good start with a summer plumage Slavonian Grebe as well as Little Grebe, Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Coot and around 10 Black-tailed Godwits. The nearby fields at Torlum were alive with Golden Plover; many of which were in their superb summer breeding plumage. Nearby Loch Fada held a pair of Pintail, more Shoveler, Teal and Shelduck amongst others. As we headed back to the main road we also spotted a couple of Redwings along the

roadside. Leaving the freshwater lochs we stopped at Stinky Bay where a couple of Wheatears were seeking shelter from the strong winds amongst the large boulders protecting the road from the sea. Eiders and Long-tailed Duck were bobbing on the water whilst Turnstones, Sanderling, Purple Sandpipers and Curlew were along the shore. Time was ticking for the imminent arrival of our last two participants although before heading to the airport we stopped to scan the sea off Balivanich where we located more Long-tailed Ducks and a tern struggling against the wind. It was a little too far to be absolutely sure of its identity and remained a 'Commic' tern at the end of the day.

Marie and Jill arrived a little delayed but once safely on the bus we headed straight to North Uist picking up 2 female Hen Harrier on route to Balranald. We also paused to look at a mixture of gulls hanging around a sheep feeding station and found a juvenile Glaucous Gull amongst the more regular species resting at Claddach Kirkibost. Once at Balranald we had

our lunch at the visitor centre before driving out to the coast and taking a short walk in the wild weather down to the south shore of Aird an Runair. Amongst the regular waders we spotted a male Ruff that had started to moult into summer plumage. It was feeding on the seaweed along the tideline, which was a most unusual spot for this scarce spring visitor. A juvenile Iceland Gull flew past us at close range and we managed to spot a few Razorbills and Great Northern Divers off-shore before retreating to the van once again. We moved on to Hougharry although it was pretty quiet so we continued around the north-west of the island picking up a Corn Bunting by the road in Tigharry and good numbers of Golden Plovers in roadside fields. We pulled off the main road at Griminish pier and hung around for a while. A juvenile Glaucous Gull flew past on the Vallay side of the tidal inlet and we stumbled across an Otter holt below where we were parked. It showed lots of signs of recent activity with fresh prints and spraints but the animal remained elusive. We then returned the way we had come, stopping in at Loch Sandary where we spotted a male Green-winged Teal as well as Wigeon, Teal and Tufted Ducks. Our final stop was on the small island of Baleshare, attached to the main island of North Uist via a causeway. This low-lying island felt a bit windswept today although we still picked up Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Shoveler, Snipe and plenty more Golden Plover. Baleshare rounded off the sites for the day and despite the challenging conditions we had a full and varied first day.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> April:

Weather: Lighter winds today with a moderate south-south-westerly and mostly cloudy with rain or drizzle throughout much of the day.

Today we headed to South Uist and the headland of Rubha Ardvule, lying around half way down the island on the west side. As we headed across Bornish machair to reach the peninsula we paused to have a look on Loch Bornish which held a few Goldeneye as well as Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Teal, Whooper Swans and 4 Sand Martins hawking in the distance. Once at the coast we parked and took a short walk to the point picking up a juvenile Iceland Gull, which flew past and various ducks on the small freshwater loch including a female Lesser Scaup paired with a male Tufted Duck. Shelduck, Wigeon and Teal were also present on the loch whilst the coast had Eider, Sanderling, Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone and Bar-tailed Godwit amongst others. Off-shore we spotted a few Gannets heading past and a Fulmar came to check us out on a couple of occasions as we stood by the old radar. Great Northern Diver and Long-tailed Duck also added to the variety of birds in the area. We moved on for a brief stop at Kildonan where one or two of us who remained outside picked up some distant raptors over the hillside which included a male and female Hen Harrier, a

Peregrine and a brief Short-eared Owl; which only Steve managed to spot before it disappeared from view.

We had our packed lunch at North Loch Eynort with an entourage of Harbour Seals. The rain was quite persistent at the time and a bit too damp for a walk so post lunch we took a drive to the south side. Quite a few seals were hauled out here and whilst searching one of the inlets an Otter put in a brief appearance. We moved position and managed to spot it once again as it came out on a rock to spraint before heading back amongst the seaweed to feed. We managed to scope the animal as it occasionally came out on the edge of rocks to devour a small catch before it continued it's feeding under the seaweed and eventually moved out of sight. We left the shelter of Loch Eynort and returned to the west coast spotting Little Grebe and Tufted Duck on West Loch Ollay before pulling up on the top of the dune edge at Peninerine. A male Common Scoter was spotted on the sea as well as various Great Northern Divers and Eiders, whilst a dead dolphin and some other rotting remains were attracting a few white-winged gulls. We had some good views of 3 juvenile Iceland Gulls and a 2<sup>nd</sup> winter Glaucous Gull as well as plenty of waders along the tideline including Turnstone, Sanderling and Ringed Plover. A Sand Martin was spotted hawking over the sea whilst inland good numbers of Golden Plovers were feeding in the fields.

Our final sites all lay at the north-west end of South Uist, starting at Loch Bee where we found 4 Scaup on the loch which also held large numbers of Mute Swans and a handful of Whooper Swans. Teal, Wigeon, Shelduck and Tufted Ducks were also picked up before we moved on to Ardivachar point and the South Ford. As we headed across the Range we spotted around 10 Greenland White-fronted Geese feeding on the machair which turned out to our only birds of the trip. The complex coastline along the South Ford added a few new birds to our tally including Grey Plover and Knot amongst good numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits, Dunlin, Sanderling, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Redshank and Curlew to round off another productive day.

### 15<sup>th</sup> April:

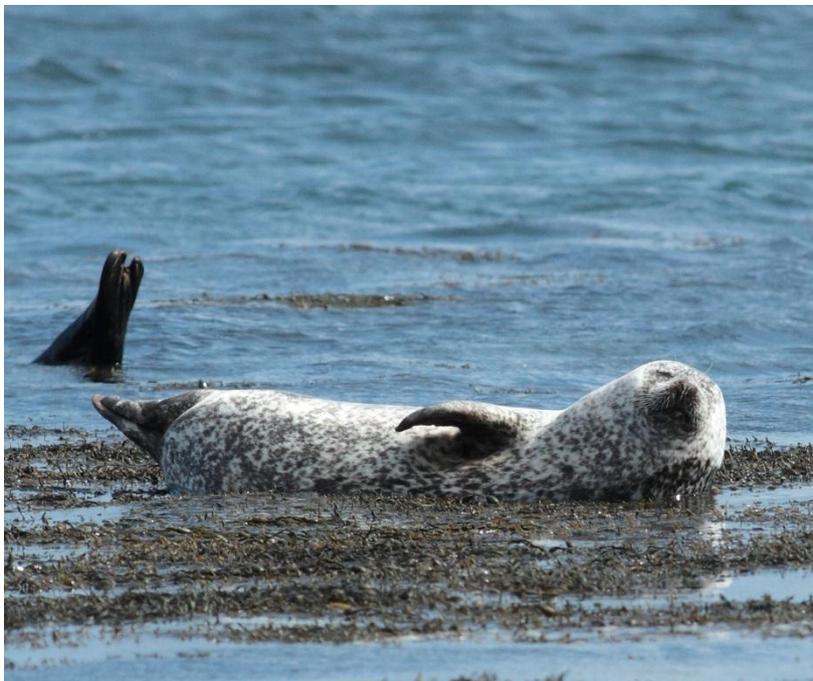
Weather: The wind was a moderate west-north-westerly today with sunny periods and occasional showers.

Our first port of call this morning was Langass Lodge, North Uist where we took a walk to the stone circle known as Pobull Fhinn. The slightly sheltered habitat by the lodge provided us with views of 2 Chiffchaffs, Goldcrest, Stonechat, Wren, Dunnock, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, 3 Goldfinch and a brief Sparrowhawk (Steve only). 2 Red-throated Divers flew over calling and



a ringtail Hen Harrier passed us as we climbed the steps to the stone circle. A more distant male Hen Harrier was displaying to the south whilst the tidal loch below held Red-breasted Mergansers and a Greenshank. Red Deer were also obvious in various spots around the lodge. We returned to the vehicle and continued north to Lochmaddy and down towards Spanish where we had good, prolonged views of an Otter fishing, grooming and resting on

rocks. Birdlife in the harbour included 2 summer plumage Black-throated Divers, Red-throated Divers, Red-breasted Mergansers, Black Guillemot, another Sparrowhawk (Steve only) as well as Song Thrush and Redwing in Lochmaddy itself. Once again we headed north pausing at Oban Trumisgarry where a juvenile Iceland Gull flew across the road in front of us, heading west.



Leaving the main island of North Uist we crossed a short causeway to Berneray and pulled over at Rushgarry for lunch. The aquamarine waters of the Sound of Harris held quite a few birds and we soon picked up summer plumage Slavonian Grebe, around 10 Great Northern Divers, Black Guillemot, Long-tailed Duck and Eider. Perhaps best of all though was an

immature White-tailed Eagle that appeared from the north at quite close range before it began circling in front of us whilst drifting east. After lunch we took a walk along this very scenic beach and had good views of Common Tern as well as Sanderling, Turnstone, Ringed Plover and Purple Sandpiper. Good numbers of Rock Pipits, Pied Wagtails and

Wheatears were also feeding along the seaweed, strewn along the shore. Once our stroll along the beach was over we headed for the freshwater, Loch Bhrusda which was fairly quiet apart from a few Tufted Duck although the bank and machair beyond was alive with Barnacle Geese that must have numbered a couple of thousand birds. A lone Black-tailed Godwit was also feeding at the north end of the loch.

We returned to North Uist and completed a circuit taking us through Grenitote, over the Committee Road and back to Benbecula. We stopped at various spots along the route with another Chiffchaff seen at Grenitote memorial plantation whilst hundreds of Barnacle Geese could be found spread out across the fields and islands to the north. Nearby the tidal flats at Grenitote had Bar-tailed Godwits; including a bird in summer plumage as well as Knot, Golden Plover and the ubiquitous Oystercatchers. Linnets were feeding in an adjacent field and a few Shelduck were on the sands. As we crossed the Committee Road our attention was drawn to 2 Raven heading for the nearby hillside. 3 Buzzards were also up in the air and suddenly a Golden Eagle made a brief appearance, low over the hill top which also set a female Hen Harrier off alarm calling. The eagle unfortunately didn't reappear and the rest of the birds soon settled down to do their own thing once again. Finally as we headed through Carinish a Kestrel was spotted by the main road.

### 16<sup>th</sup> April:

Weather: A moderate south-south-easterly in the morning decreased in the afternoon to a pleasant light wind by the evening. It was rather cool but sunny for the majority of the day.

From Benbecula we headed south to North Loch Eynort, picking up a couple of Wood Pigeons on route at Snishival. Once parked at Loch Eynort we took a walk around the network of paths through the trees and shrubs. At least 6 Willow Warblers were singing whilst we also spotted a female Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Dunnock and Song Thrush amongst others. A couple of Red-throated Divers were on the tidal loch and showing well whilst the small coniferous plantation held around 6 pairs of nesting Grey Herons. A Hen Harrier gave a flyby and 2 distant White-tailed Eagles were spotted at the mouth of the loch to the east. Mammal wise we also had a distant Red Deer silhouetted on the skyline and lots of Harbour Seals in the loch. We continued south having a short look in at Eriskay where we spotted a couple of Gannets, Cormorant, Eider and Great Northern Diver before returning to South Uist. A couple of Whimbrel flew off calling whilst Curlew, Turnstone, Redshank and Shelduck were feeding along the beach and providing some good views as we tucked into our rolls. A few Great Northern Divers could be seen bobbing in the Sound of Barra to the south of us and more were picked up when we

took a post lunch walk to the west coast. A juvenile Iceland Gull was on the seaweed and around 90 – 100 pale-bellied Brent Geese were sat on the sea off Garrynamonie. We watched them for a while, when all of a sudden they were off, heading north and out of sight. We returned to the bus and continued north ourselves, calling in at Kipheder although before we arrived around 200 Pink-footed Geese flew north out to sea to the west. Once at the coast we had more Eiders, Great Northern Divers, Gannets and Harbour Seals. A Buzzard was perched on a fence post on the machair and 3 Sand Martins were spotted hawking insects. A little further north lies the freshwater, Loch Hallan where we found a pair of Pintail, Shoveler, Tufted Duck and a few Twite. Our final stop after grabbing a cuppa at Kildonan café was on the east side of Benbecula at Peter's Port. Things were pretty quiet here although a distant flock of around 50 Pink-footed Geese were watched heading north-west between us and South Uist rounding off another good day.

### 17<sup>th</sup> April:

Weather: Light, variable winds and sunny.

Carrie and Stephen had to leave a day early to catch the morning ferry to Oban today so once they had been dropped off in Lochboisdale the rest of us headed up to Balranald. We parked on the coast and took a walk around the headland of Aird an Runair. Not long after setting off a juvenile Glaucous Gull flew overhead calling before circling higher and setting off north. A Swallow zipped past a little further on whilst out at sea 100's of Barnacle Geese were seen heading north in the calm conditions. Flocks of Barnacle Geese were spread over the headland with some the groups also deciding it was time to go once they'd been encouraged into the air by our passing. Other species we picked up on the walk included Great Northern Diver, Eiders, Fulmar, Gannets, Wheatears, Rock Pipit and Twite. On the way back to the vehicle we had good views of a singing Corn Bunting perched on a clump of Marram Grass. The small loch near the car park also held Moorhen and a couple of Shoveler. Before leaving Balranald we also spotted 12 Pink-footed Geese heading north; it was obviously a good day to go!

We moved on to Hougharry where we picked up more Tufted Duck, Moorhen and Little Grebe before continuing along the north-west side of the island. As we approached Balelone a Golden Eagle was spotted circling low over the hills to the east and came down to join a bird that was already sat on the crag. The first individual circled round for a while, landing in the field before leaving to the east whilst the other bird sat tight incubating. Once the mobile bird had left we also followed suite and moved on to Griminish pier where we had our lunch. 4 Great Northern Divers were in the channel here and a couple of immature White-tailed

Eagles were watched perched on rocks for at least ½ an hour before they headed inland. 2 Great Skuas flew over as did a skein of Pink-footed Geese whilst both Curlew and Whimbrel added even more variety at our very active lunch stop.

We retraced our route after lunch but called in at Loch Sandary where we managed to find a selection of wildfowl including Teal, Wigeon, Tufted Duck and more Barnacle Geese. A couple of Moorhens were creeping along the bank whilst the fields were full of Golden Plover in superb summer plumage. A short drive from here took us to our parking spot near Balemore from where we took a walk out to Rubh' Arnal.



The brighter weather brought out a few insects including a few Small Tortoiseshell butterflies and a flyby, male Belted Beauty. A couple of Corn Buntings were singing but the birdlife really had quite a wintery feel with a brief view of a juvenile Kumlien's Gull as well as 6 Iceland Gulls (an adult and 5 juveniles) and 4 immature

Glaucous Gulls. A Merlin shot past us at the point whilst we also picked up Great Northern Diver, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Sanderling and a couple of showy Twite.

We returned to Benbecula and pulled in at Stinky Bay where we found Long-tailed Duck, Eiders and Purple Sandpiper amongst the Dunlin, Turnstone and Ringed Plovers to round off a great and diverse day.

## 18<sup>th</sup> April:

Weather: Very light, variable winds, sunny and feeling warm.

Jill and Marie were leaving on the mid-afternoon sailing to Oban from Lochboisdale so we gradually made our way down the islands, arriving in plenty of time for the ferry. Firstly we called in at Stinky Bay which had plenty going on with waders scurrying about on the shore including Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone, Sanderling, Dunlin and Ringed Plover. A couple of Great Northern Divers and a small flotilla of Long-tailed Ducks were just south of the bay whilst the Eiders were busy “cooing” away and adding to the general ambience of the scene. Nearby Coot Loch held a summer plumage Slavonian Grebe amongst the regular Little Grebe as well as 5 Gadwall, Wigeon, Shoveler, Teal, Tufted Duck, Black-tailed Godwits, Moorhen and of course a couple of Coots. The fields were still alive with Golden Plover, flanking both sides of the road as we headed towards South Uist.

The view from the base of the statue ‘Our Lady of the Isles’ was stunning in the sunshine and only a short drive from our next stop at Druidibeg. On our way to a parking area along the Loch Skipport road we stopped to have a look at a diver which turned out to be a cracking summer plumage Black-throated Diver that showed very well until it eventually flew off eastwards. Shortly after we parked and walked down the minor road to the plantation. The plantation itself had a couple of Willow Warblers and a male Blackcap; a Common Redpoll dropped in and both Stonechat and Linnet were seen by the road. Before heading back to the vehicle a Golden Eagle glided almost overhead, providing some good views before gaining height and distance. We moved on to Stoneybridge for lunch, spotting a Redwing nearby before a short walk on the edge of the coast. 2 Red-throated Divers flew over calling and a few Great Northern Divers were busy fishing off-shore. Long-tailed Duck and Eider were also present and in a week full of white-winged gulls we picked up a 2<sup>nd</sup> winter Glaucous Gull and another 2 juvenile Iceland Gulls. Waders here included more Purple Sandpipers, Curlew and 3 Whimbrel. Finally we called in at Kildonan and Flora MacDonald’s birth place. A couple of Reed Buntings were spotted along with Buzzard and last but not least a Hen Harrier.

Marie and Jill said their goodbyes in Lochboisdale as they awaited the arrival of the mid-afternoon sailing to Oban. Roger returned to his guesthouse in Benbecula around mid-afternoon, for a departure the following day on the ferry to Skye and rounding off a very enjoyable, inaugural Early Spring Tour.

## Species List:

Mute Swan	Common and seen every day
Whooper Swan	Small numbers were seen almost every day
Pink-footed Goose	A few migratory skeins were seen, 16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup>
White-fronted Goose	A small flock was seen west of Loch Bee
Greylag Goose	Common
Barnacle Goose	Good numbers seen on 3 dates with a large northerly movement noted on 17 <sup>th</sup>
Brent Goose	90 – 100 pale-bellied birds were off Garrynamonie, 16 <sup>th</sup>
Shelduck	Common
Mallard	Common
Gadwall	Seen on 2 dates with up to 5 on Coot Loch
Shoveler	Fairly common and almost every day
Wigeon	Common
Pintail	Two pairs were seen during the week
Teal	Fairly common and seen every day
Green-winged Teal	A drake was on Loch Sandary, 13 <sup>th</sup>
Tufted Duck	Common and seen every day
Lesser Scaup	A female was on Loch Ardvule, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Scaup	4 were on Loch Bee, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Eider	Common
Long-tailed Duck	Small numbers seen every day apart from one
Common Scoter	A drake was off Peninerine, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Goldeneye	Around 12 individuals were on Loch Bornish, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Red-breasted Merganser	Seen every day in small numbers
Red-throated Diver	Seen on three dates
Black-throated Diver	2 showed well in Lochmaddy, 15 <sup>th</sup> and another on Loch Druidibeg, 18 <sup>th</sup>
Great Northern Diver	The most commonly seen diver; seen every day
Little Grebe	Fairly common and seen daily

Slavonian Grebe	Summer plumage individuals were on Coot Loch and off Berneray
Fulmar	Seen daily
Gannet	Common off-shore
Cormorant	Common
Shag	Common
Grey Heron	Common, breeding at Loch Eynort
White-tailed Eagle	We had sightings on 3 dates
Golden Eagle	Seen on 3 dates during the week
Hen Harrier	Seen virtually daily in small numbers
Buzzard	Common
Sparrowhawk	2 sightings (Steve only)
Kestrel	Seen almost every day
Peregrine	One at Kildonan, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Merlin	One at Rubh' Arnal, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Moorhen	Seen on 3 dates
Coot	Only seen on 'Coot Loch'
Oystercatcher	Very common
Ringed Plover	Very common
Grey Plover	Seen on the South Ford off Hebridean Jewellery, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Golden Plover	Large flocks of summer plumage plovers were seen in many places on the machair throughout the week
Lapwing	Common
Knot	Seen on 2 dates with one or two in full summer plumage
Sanderling	Common
Purple Sandpiper	Seen almost every day of the trip
Turnstone	Common
Dunlin	Common passage migrant and breeder
Redshank	Very common
Greenshank	Seen on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Black-tailed Godwit	Seen on 3 dates during the week

Bar-tailed Godwit	Seen on two dates with one or two in breeding plumage
Ruff	A male was on the tideline at Balranald, 13 <sup>th</sup>
Curlew	Fairly common and seen every day
Whimbrel	Small numbers were seen on the last three days of the tour
Snipe	Common
Great Skua	2 at Claddach Vallay, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Black-headed Gull	Common
Common Gull	Very common
Herring Gull	Common
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Fairly common
Great Black-backed Gull	Common
Glaucous Gull	Seen on 4 dates with 4 near Rubh' Arnal, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Iceland Gull	Seen every day with a maximum of 6 at Rubh' Arnal, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Common Tern	A tern off Balivanich on 13 <sup>th</sup> was probably this species. One was seen well on Berneray, 15 <sup>th</sup>
Black Guillemot	Seen on two dates
Razorbill	Occasionally seen off-shore
Rock Dove	Very common
Wood Pigeon	A couple at Snishival, 16 <sup>th</sup>
Collared Dove	Fairly common
Short-eared Owl	Steve spotted one briefly at Kildonan, 14 <sup>th</sup>
Skylark	Common
Swallow	One at Aird an Runair, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Sand Martin	Small numbers seen on 2 dates
Rock Pipit	Small numbers seen almost daily
Meadow Pipit	Common
Pied Wagtail	Seen every day
(White Wagtail	Seen in small numbers on 16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> )
Hebridean Wren	Common in certain areas
Hebridean Dunnock	Common in the right habitat
Robin	Seen on 4 dates

Wheatear	Very common with some Greenland migrants passing through
Stonechat	Seen on 3 dates
Hebridean Song Thrush	Not uncommon around gardens
Blackbird	Common
Blackcap	One at Loch Eynort, 16 <sup>th</sup> and one at Druidibeg, 18 <sup>th</sup>
Willow Warbler	At least 6 were singing at Loch Eynort, 16 <sup>th</sup>
Chiffchaff	2 at Langass and 1 at Grenitote, 15 <sup>th</sup> and one at Loch Eynort, 16 <sup>th</sup>
Goldcrest	Seen at Loch Eynort and Langass Lodge
Hooded Crow	Seen every day and increasing in the islands
Raven	Common
Hebridean Starling	Very common
House Sparrow	Common
Chaffinch	Seen around plantations
Linnet	Fairly common
Twite	Common
Common Redpoll	Birds resembling this species were seen on 18 <sup>th</sup> at Druidibeg
Goldfinch	Seen on 2 dates in small numbers
Greenfinch	Seen on 2 dates
Reed Bunting	Seen near Kildonan, 18 <sup>th</sup>
Corn Bunting	This declining species was seen on 2 days in North Uist

**Mammals:**

Otter	Sightings at Loch Eynort and Lochmaddy
Grey Seal	Seen on 2 days
Harbour Seal	Common in more sheltered bays / lochs
Red Deer	Seen on 3 days
Rabbit	Common in certain areas
Brown Rat	One spotted on 16 <sup>th</sup>

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